

EVERYTHING AND NOTHING AT THE SAME TIME

Hank D. Ballenger, B. A., M. A.

Dissertation Prepared for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

May 1999

APPROVED:

John Robert (Haj) Ross, Major Professor

Austin Hummell, Committee Member

Eugene Wright, Committee Member

Lynn Eubank, Chair of Graduate Studies in English

C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B. Toulouse School of
Graduate Studies

Ballenger, Hank D., Everything and Nothing at the Same Time. Doctor of
Philosophy (English), May 1999 , 116 pp.

This paradoxically titled collection of poems explores what the blues and
blindness has come to mean to the author.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The candidate wishes to thank the Texas Commission for the Blind and its related agencies for their steadfast assistance in matters financial, academic, and most especially technical. There is no hyperbole in the assertion that without the support of the candidate's current TCB counselor, Alyssa Cyr, and her predecessors, this project and those that have led up to it would have been impossible

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
Chapter	
1. PREFACE: A STATEMENT OF POETICS	1
2. MALEDICTION.....	12
3. PROFIT AND LOSS IN MESQUITE TEXAS.....	13
4. WHEELS.....	14
5. BRIGID	20
6. AT THE CORNER OF FRIDAY NIGHT AND SATURDAY MORNING: PART ONE.....	23
7. A PLACE FOR THEE	24
8. THE WRONG MAN.....	26
9. NEW LOVE ATTRACTS ADVICE	31
10. "EVERYBODY SAY SHE'S GOT A MOJO	32
11. OUT WITH AN EX-GIRLFRIEND.....	41
12. SPRING FEVER: A PIECE FOR PREPARED PIANO	43
13. 4 AM: THE LAS VEGAS EFFECT	44
14. REGARDING AN EARLY LINE.....	55
15. AT THE CORNER OF FRIDAY NIGHT AND SATURDAY MORNING: PART TWO	56
16. JUST A MINUTE.....	57

17. NOT HERE	59
18. SUGGESTIVE SELL.....	61
19. FRAGMENTS IN IMITATION OF SAPPHO	63
20. THE LAUNDROMAT TRILOGY 1: MOST POLITE, CLASS OF '88.....	65
21. THE LAUNDROMAT TRILOGY2: DOES THAT EXCITE YOU?.....	75
22. THE LAUNDROMAT TRILOGY 3: YOU HEAD SO BIG	81
23. THE ONE CHORD.....	86
24. FETTUCINI CARBONARA	88
25. THE OTHER MAN	89
26. SONNETS TO REPETITIOUS, II:13	92
27. WHEN ANNE STOPPED CHANGING.....	93
28. AT THE CORNER OF FRIDAY NIGHT AND SATURDAY MORNING: PART THREE	97
29. EXPERIENCE PREFERRED	99
30. LOS BRAZOS DE DIOS	104
31. THE WOODEN FLOOR	108

PREFACE: A STATEMENT OF POETICS

Following the proceedings of the annual Delta Studies Symposium on the Blues, held each spring at Arkansas State University, there is an informal social gathering of conference participants, conference staff, ASU faculty, and anyone else in the area who wants to hear the assembled scholars and performers pay a final tribute to the music they love in the last, best way, by performing it together. That is one of the amazing things about the blues, from a performer's perspective; since the repertoire is overwhelmingly based on a few standardized chord progressions, musicians who have never played together before can gather and produce a spontaneous performance that blends their individual styles into a coherent but changeable whole. There is little need for learning specific *songs* since nearly all blues songs fall into these basic forms. Once a musician has mastered the 12-bar blues in three or four keys at various tempos, he can accompany nearly any other blues musician. As long as all the players *want* to play together, they can.

I took a break from playing during one of these post-Symposium jam sessions to get myself some refreshments, when one of the original scholars who tracked down and interviewed seminal performers of the Mississippi Delta and East Coast Piedmont regions during the great flowering of scholarship that accompanied/fueled the country blues revival of the 1960's pulled me aside and said, "Hank, I've been listening to you play over

there, and I've heard your presentations at these conferences, and you seem like somebody who's serious about the blues, so I want to tell you something very, very important."

I looked around for a burning bush, then prepared myself to hear something that I suspected I would be thinking about for some time to come.

"Hank, I'm going to tell you the difference between black people and white people."

I waited.

"Black people don't give a fuck about the guitar."

I still waited

"White guys," this celebrated scholar said slowly, "get all wrapped up in the guitar. They play and play and play, but they never learn to sing. You gotta sing, or nobody's gonna care but other guitar players. If you want to play for people, whether it's in clubs or on street corners, you gotta sing. You don't have to have a great voice, God knows I don't, but if you don't sing, nobody cares. You can sit on a street corner all night long, playing your ass off, and nobody's gonna give you a minute or a dime. Remember that, and learn to fuckin' sing."

Though I am keenly averse to generalizing about what poetry is, over the last few years I have spent a great deal of time thinking about what this scholar said and how I could profit artistically from his advice. He didn't mean to tell me that all African-Americans are uninterested in instrumental virtuosity or that the only way to really be a blues musician was to be a singer. What I think he was trying to tell me is that the blues

is a music that is about connecting the performer with the audience and that the best way to do that is through the human voice. I have come to think of poetry as a performance in front of an audience of readers, and that conception of poetry has led me to some firm, though not irreversible if circumstances warrant, decisions about how I myself am going to go about writing and thinking about poetry.

Curiously, at the same time that blues musicians like Son House, Bukka White, and Skip James were located and put on stages for audiences far larger than they had entertained in their youth, a kind of second wave of Romanticism transformed the staid academic poetry of the forties and early fifties into Beat, confessional, and political poetry that flourishes largely unchanged thirty years later. The focus on the individual voice and the dominance of the short, free verse lyric in one part of American culture coincided with a revival of interest in folk music, black, brown, red, and white, in another part. What intrigues me about these two separate enterprises is that while the poetry turned increasingly inward and egocentric, the music became increasingly communal. The idea that blues musicians of the twenties and thirties were always solo performers has been propagated by the nature of the commercial recordings they made, which were largely "Blind Jim Bob Lincoln, Accompanied by Own Guitar." Judging from non-commercial recordings such as those done by the Lomaxes for the Library of Congress, the performances were group affairs, often with a substantial audience. When scholars interviewed musicians, the anecdotes they recorded were thickly populated with names and nicknames enough to suggest that most blues performances were group efforts, with much interchange between musicians and audience. The commercial recordings were

frequently stripped-down to one or two musicians at a time for the simplest of reasons; fewer musicians meant lower production expenditures, even considering how little these musicians were paid for their work. If a producer could manage to get the record for even less, he certainly would.

This performance-based, audience-friendly poetics I have come to appreciate as a musician has changed the way I write and the way I think about writing in several ways. First and probably most important among them is that I try to give the reader something familiar in each poem, a recognizable form, an accessible level of diction, generally correct grammar (no awkward inversions, stranded adjectives or other contortions just to make the line "poetic"), or a familiar opening scene. These early elements comfort the skittish reader (I assume all readers are skittish, liable to stop reading at any time, because they're the ones who might bolt; the robust poetry aficionado will keep reading anyway) in the same way that a familiar turnaround from the V chord to the I assures the listener that there is blues ahead, whatever else may come. Some of the oldest poems in this collection are the most rigidly metrical, such as "Wheels" and "Brigid". I wrote the first draft of "Wheels" during Scott Cairns' last poetry workshop here at the University of North Texas. He understood what I was doing with the poem metrically, using the dreaded iambic tetrameter loosely early on, but with increasing insistence as the poem progressed, until it became almost *too* march-like at the end when thematically, the wheels come off and the poem's smooth acceleration has peaked, as the protagonist arrives at her apartment to discover that it has been robbed while she was away, something completely unpredictable from what has gone before. I wanted to write a

poem that dealt with the daily issues of a blind person's life, but in a way that made it seem less strange, less alien. I also wanted to write a poem whose meter supported the theme, as the tick-tock of tetrameter echoes the walking pace of the protagonist and accelerates as she tries to get away from those annoying drummers, also playing in 4/4, until the wheels come off of the poem rhythmically and thematically at the same time, the way the drum line accelerates until it can't keep up its own pace anymore. By starting with a conventional-sounding narrative in a clearly recognizable meter, one usually associated with light or comic verse, just to lure the reader into a further state of comfort, I give the reader something familiar before I take her into the unfamiliar thematic territory of blindness.

Pentameter serves a similar purpose in another of the older poems in this collection, "Brigid". I wanted to try to get inside the skull of Sam Spade, the archetypal hard-boiled detective of Dashiell Hammett's masterpiece, The Maltese Falcon. The novel is written in a kind of hyper-third-person, with almost no figurative language and no eavesdropping on characters' thoughts. It was a natural candidate for cinema, since the novel's essentially nothing but description and dialogue. The John Huston version of the novel stars Humphrey Bogart, in the role that began his transition from character villain to American icon, and Bogart's performance is nearly perfect, despite the fact that he looks nothing like the character Hammett described as "a blond Satan." The scene I chose to play with is one in which the Femme Fatale, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, played by Mary Astor, is trying to get Spade's help while not really telling him anything. She's in full feminine wiles mode, while Spade just watches from the fireplace. The statement

Spade uses to interrupt her, "You won't need much of anybody's help," scans as perfect iambic pentameter, so that is the poetic line I chose, luring the reader in once again with a familiar meter while he accustoms himself to the idea of being inside the head of Sam Spade while Brigid tries to do a con job on him, or, if the reader doesn't know the informing text, the idea of being inside a man's head while a woman tells him a story he doesn't seem to believe--I tried to write the poem so that one doesn't have to know who Brigid and Mr. Spade are, but it helps.

Once the audience has been assured that they are, in fact, going to hear some blues, the musicians have to give them something different. That's one major distinction I see between the blues poetics and the Romantics' cult of originality. In a sense, Pound's "Make it new" was very Romantic, much as he seemed to dislike Romanticism. The dominant poetry of today, the short, free verse lyric, privileges originality over all other principles, sending every convention of grammar, syntax, tastefulness, subject matter, and form scrambling for cover as each poet tries to write something unlike anything that has been written before in as many respects as possible. Please understand, I am not decrying originality, merely suggesting that by causing poets to look over their shoulders all the time at what everyone else is doing to make sure they aren't doing the same thing, many writers seem to have sacrificed a lasting form of resonance for a momentary sensation, trading awe for, "Oh, wow." In my less charitable moments, I call this "espresso poetry", where each line must contain a kick to the head or a punch to the solar plexus, the Soundbite Poetics of contemporary poetry. Blues doesn't work like that. B. B. King will certainly punctuate his lines of verse with musical flourishes, and he will

take a solo that builds flash upon flash of virtuosity, releasing the tension at the end with a resolution, but when the vocal line starts again, it doesn't start over at the beginning level of intensity. A blues song builds verse by verse, phrase by phrase, building to a climax that has been earned, not merely manufactured with a moment of deftness.

Espresso poetry climaxes at the end of every line, leaving the reader too drained to realize what might have been done with the same material over another twenty lines or forty or more. The best blues songs are not the hodgepodes of traveling verses constructed on the fly in either the recording studio or the concert stage. The best blues songs are compositionally whole, like the songs of Willie Dixon, Robert Johnson, or Bukka White. They have beginnings, middles, and endings, though not always in the narrative sense. Sometimes the development is more emotional or psychological; the stages are stages of grief and recovery. Such a structure builds line by line, verse by verse. In a short poem like "Not Here" or "A Place for Thee", this kind of progression assembles through the accumulation of details a representation of a mood that is not so far removed from common experience for a reader to nod and feel he's been there or somewhere in that same neighborhood.

The slow build works even better in longer poems like "The Wooden Floor", a multi-part, multi-page blank verse narrative that works backwards section by section through the events before and after a party. As each section unfolds, it explains what happened before and raises new questions about how the story got to this point. By arranging the scenes in reverse order, the reader sees effects and must guess at the causes, learning more about the characters and their relationships as the regress continues. I don't

know of any blues songs arranged in reverse chronology, but there are many examples (Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Prison Cell Blues" for one) which start from the end of their narratives then move back to the beginning. The notion of tension and resolution is a fundamental of music and storytelling, whatever form the story may take. Readers like to be momentarily bewildered, as long as they have developed enough trust in their guide (the familiarity factor again) that he will not leave them stranded. Musically speaking, one has to return to the I chord, the home key, to leave the audience feeling that they haven't missed anything, at least until they have had time to reflect on the performance, noticing nuances and motifs they missed at the time, which brings me to another thing I think I have learned about writing from studying and performing the blues.

Hide the art until it's time to show off a little, then hide it again, because too much art will destroy the groove. Rhythm is repetition in a recognizable pattern. Groove (a terribly technical term for a dissertation preface, I know) is a kind of rhythm that you don't have to think about any more, a swing so sure that you *know* where the next beat is going to be and you can prepare for it and enjoy it when it happens. Too much technical showmanship makes people watch the musician instead of feel his groove. I have always preferred a more unadorned diction than many of my contemporaries, and most of the time I don't even violate the rules of grammar in my poetry. Here I agree with Pound's sentiment, though I find it was a sentiment he honored more in the breach than the observance: no book words. At least, not many, and only when I feel I'm really getting something for them, adding some meaning, turning a phrase in a surprising direction, but a surprise that still makes sense in retrospect. I enjoy beautiful language, and I even have

an affection for those flashes of purple one finds in Espresso Poetry just for their own technical spectacle, but I seem to recall Aristotle having something to say on the subject of spectacle....

Some of the poems in this collection written last are the sonnets: "New Love Attracts Advice", "Sonnets to Repetitious 2:13", "Profit and Loss in Mesquite, Texas", and "Regarding an Early Line". The challenge of writing sonnets in contemporary English is to keep the English contemporary. That doesn't have mean excessively colloquial or self-consciously plain, merely contemporary. The kinds of syncopations and apostrophes and inversions that make Shakespeare's sonnets sound like Shakespeare's sonnets sound utterly pretentious in modern English. The same is true of the blues-- Corey Harris (my favorite contemporary acoustic blues musician) did not grow up on a cotton plantation, and he doesn't try to write songs as if he did. When he performs period material, he performs it with respect, but he doesn't try to imitate its mannerisms in his own songs. The art here isn't in imitating the flourishes of the past but in bringing their substance into the present. When I write a sonnet, I don't ask myself, "What would Shakespeare do?" I ask myself, "What do I gain artistically if I make this poem I'm going to write anyway into a sonnet?" Put another way, "Is this a sonnet subject?" I have heard blues songs about recycling and such, and these songs sound contrived, because they are contrived, contrived to sound contemporary. When I perform a song by a long-dead Mississippian, I don't try to sound like I was born on Stovall's plantation. I was born in Mineral Wells, Texas, in the Crazy Water Hotel, as a matter of fact, quite a distance from the Mississippi Delta, though not so far from a few cotton fields. When I write a blues, I

choose that form because the subject seems like a blues subject; when I write a sonnet because it's a sonnet subject, sometimes defined a bit broadly for the tastes of purists.

The art in using an old form with new language doesn't come from overt displays; it comes from a seamless integration of old form and new thought, if such a thing exists any more. There ought to be what I call a "lyric moment", a moment of great beauty that serves as the gemstone of the ring, but the rest of the ring has to be there. You can't just carry around the gemstone and expect it to be called jewelry. In musical terms, you can't just solo all the time. As my friend from Arkansas put it, "You gotta fuckin' learn to sing."

I took a couple of years off of writing poetry some years ago, feeling I had gotten stuck in a pattern: witty, rhymed satires in the Pope vein, presented at coffeehouses for admittedly large, appreciative crowds. During my exile, I tried very hard to be a good 20th century American Literature scholar, acquainting myself with the usual suspects, consorting with known literary theorists, and generally trying to live my reputation down. When I came back to poetry, I wrote poems that were less witty, with less rhyme, but with greater variety of tone and subject. The humor has not gone entirely, nor the satire, nor even the rhyme, but something about me and my poetics had changed. I still wanted to be a crowd-pleaser, but I wanted to please in a different way. I had started playing guitar during my poetic hiatus, and not long after the first of these mature poems (if they really are) I started seriously studying the blues, eventually logging some time as a performer. I have also been coming to better terms with my visual disability, accommodating myself to the reality that I am more blind than sighted. I spent many

years in a form of denial, trying to do things I had no business doing, trying to do as much or more work than my colleagues, grading freshman composition papers through a magnifying glass. I am only beginning to understand how my blindness as affected my writing and my life. It was only about two years ago that I started talking more openly about it, instead of trying to "pass", a skill I have refined pretty substantially over the years. Perhaps my next collection of poems will deal more specifically with this aspect of my life, and perhaps the preface I write for that book will reveal a radically different poetic stance, one less informed by the blues and more informed by, well, whatever possesses me next. I look forward to reading it.

MALEDICTION

A blind man doesn't have
To be sitting there
Looking at you
To give you the evil eye.

Words and memories
Are the only magic
I believe in anymore.
My words,
Your memories.

PROFIT AND LOSS IN MESQUITE, TEXAS

For Bryan Griffin

I like directing Buddhist funerals
Because the mourners always smile and tip
Most handsomely. Among their rituals,
They fill a bowl with money to the lip
And burn it by the grave. Residuals
To help finance the dearly departed's trip,
I guess. No rambling testimonials,
Just soothing chants. Sometimes a breeze will whip
The little bowl of smolders to a flame
That crackles happily between the priest
And the deceased, a contrapuntal sound.
One time, a floating golden spark became
Enchanted with his robes. His smile increased
As I tapped, then spoke, then threw him to the ground.

WHEELS

The sun on summer afternoons
Can give Belinda partial sight:
To tell the concrete from the grass,
The bright striped crosswalk from the street.
To her, it's not an even trade,
The solid heat and soiling sweat
For shades that interrupt her thoughts.

The icy phone bank hardly helps
Prepare her for a day like this.
Already, only halfway home,
Her hair is crawling down her back
Like ivy dying on a wall.
She walks in melting chocolate shoes
On freshly roasted almond feet.

She tugs her leather shoulder bag
A little higher as she waits.
The little dog-voiced man had said,

"This intersection's awful slow."

Mobility instructors are,

In her opinion, somewhat less

Intelligent than household pests.

This last one, though, was just a joy.

His arm felt like a terrier

Who'd just escaped a needed bath.

The after-shave he ladled on

Tried hard but failed to overcome

His taco breath, which settled, warm

And greasy, on her upper chest.

The car beside her revs and grumbles,

Waiting for the light to turn.

"My goodness gracious, what a great

Enormous penis you must have,"

Belinda says beneath its breath.

It moves ahead and then across

Her path, and no one takes its place.

She hears that traffic on her left

Is crossing, so she taps her cane
In case this curb has somehow grown
Or shrunk a little while she worked.
It hasn't, so she triplet-times
On past the panting cars and trucks
Until she taps the other side.

"A student neighborhood is best,"
Her mother had said. "It's less remote.
Since lots of them don't own a car,
They colonize those places where
Most everything's within a walk.
We'll find a place with groceries, banks,
And all that sort of thing close by."

In front of Leon's Lube and Brake,
She modulates her cane technique
From tap to ragged whisper-slide.
The plastic tip glides right and left,
But Leon hears her anyway.
"Belinda, baby! Makes me hurt
To see you in those shorty-shorts!"

They aren't that short, but short enough
For Leon, what a major prick.
But then, she thinks, if that were true,
She might have bothered more than once.
On top of that, she took him home
Because she liked his raspy voice,
But he just lay there, dumb and dry.

One thing her mother hadn't known
About when picking out this place
Was that the courtyard just across
The street from where Belinda lives
Is where the college drum corps meets.
The Chinese Drummer Torture starts
At three o'clock each afternoon.

Rat	Rat	Rat	Rat
Rat-tat	Rat-tat	Rat-tat	Rat-tat
Rat-a-tat	Rat-a-tat	Rat-a-tat	Rat-a-tat
Rata-tat-a	Rata-tat-a	Rata-tat-a	Rata-tat-a

They build until the wheels come off,
Until the rhythm falls apart
Like gossip when its subject walks
In unannounced and takes a seat.
Impossible to just ignore,
The throbbing ties her brain in knots
And makes her skull feel far too small.

It's going to take some Ludwig Van
Or Hendrix --loud-- to drown this out.
That brings a small and private smile.
She slows a bit, and just for spite
She taps her cane in 7/8.
The sound of little drummer boys
Keeps beating, beating common time.

Rat Rat Rat Rat
Rat-tat Rat-tat Rat-tat Rat-tat

She finds her stairwell, folds her cane.
It's fourteen shallow stairs, then twelve,
The third door down the balcony.

Her keys are where she put them last,
And someone hasn't moved the lock.
She opens, enters, closes, turns;
The stereo remote is gone--

Rat Rat Rat Rat

The microwave beneath it-- gone.
The counter cringes from her hand,
Embarrassed by its nakedness.
A creaking board, a trembling breath,
The barstool where she drops her purse
Is missing, so it tumbles, falls,
And retches on the wooden floor.

BRIGID

A little height advantage always helps,
So I stood and took two steps toward the hearth
And turned my back against its empty face.
I perched my elbows on the mantelpiece
And coolly laid the situation out
For someone who was looking at the chair
I'd just abandoned, playing with the belt
That held her pale, striped, cotton world together.

The pockets of her robe reminded me
Just where a woman keeps her hip and breast
And any passing multitude of sins,
Both close at hand and safe from prying eyes.
Still looking at the chair, she flickered up
And brushed her fingertips around the lip
Of one of those too tall, too thin, too plain,
Too shaky tables rented rooms deserve.

One hand strayed near that ever-mobile hip;

The one she trailed around the table struck
Against a small, ceramic sugarbowl
That made a sound like metal scraping bone.
She touched it as she pleaded up at me
To ask me was there any other way,
A way that wouldn't lead to other men
And questions that she wouldn't answer yet.

I guess it was the sofa's turn to help.
She limped behind it, leaning on its back,
Then up to me to press me for my trust
While making Pilate motions with her hands.
Her circuit of the room complete, she fell,
Or seemed to fall, against its velvet arms.
"I'm so alone," she said, and her sweet neck
And shoulders quivered till it sounded true.

Her moistened eyes caught bits of vagrant light
From somewhere, pinned them down, and made them stay,
Her earrings' glitter adding counterpoint.
"If you don't help me..." poked around my chest.
I guess she thought I had a broken rib.

"You're brave, you're strong..." The tremors in her voice

Collected in a puddle at her feet.

"You won't need much of anybody's help.

You're good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think, and

That throb you get in your voice when you say

Things like, 'Be generous, Mr. Spade.'"

AT THE CORNER OF FRIDAY NIGHT AND SATURDAY MORNING: PART ONE

From where I sit
On a bar-district park bench,
I can make out tonight's Adonis
--Anemone already, in undulating, pink, spectacular drag--
Go Ovid one better,
Transforming into a parade;
This Pentecostal procession,
Cacophonous, convinced,
Carnivals across my field of view
From my worse left eye to my bad right,
Attracting lighter human particles as it goes.

A PLACE FOR THEE

1. Garage Apartment

By the time you reach the top of the whitewashed stairs,

Gravity has lost its hold on you.

The water in the dogs' dish, potting soil

And motorcycle parts below have cast

An accidental spell that frees this space

From heft. Small things feel safer here, where falls

From shelves are slower, landings gentler.

2. Duplex

The neat, controlled home office staged a coup,

Annexed the bedroom first, then signed and broke

A non-aggression treaty with the bath

And kitchen, crushed the partisans that hid

Behind the couch. This space is now for work,

All ancillary functions subject to

The Management's discretion. Carry on.

3. Apartment

The dark brown carpet looks like unkempt fur,

And sitting on the couch feels awkward, rude,

Like sitting on a lap. Dim lights compress

Your personal space. You curl against yourself,
Against the crowding push and pinch of things
That press an angry someone-else's-ness
Against you. Goodness, can that be the time?

THE WRONG MAN

Hello, I'm the wrong man.

Oh, no, not just wrong for you,

Don't be so sensitive,

So non-judgmental.

I am the wrong man,

The archetypal wrong man.

What I look like isn't important,

As long as it's interesting,

As long as it's familiar and strange,

As long as it's like someone you've already met

In an intensely erotic dream

From which you woke with a bloody lip.

That's how I got my foot in the door.

So to speak.

I am a dark man, in atmosphere

If not in actuality.

You associate me with the dark,

With dark things. We meet in a dark place.

We fuck in a dark place.

The end will happen by daylight,

But I get ahead of myself.

I know things you don't,

Things that amaze you,

Things that give me power over you.

Teacher over student,

Expert over novice,

Master over-- well, you know.

You come so hard you think your eyes will explode,

And you think that means I love you.

Then there are the times

I can't (won't?) get it up at all,

And you lie next to me,

Clinging to my shoulders,

And you invariably ask,

"Have I done something wrong?"

You're so easy.

But you don't want to think about those times,
You just want to think about
The various ways
I make you thank God you're sexually active.
The forcefulness
Is just my passionate nature,
Or so you tell yourself.
I would never actually hurt you,
No, never.
It's just my intense personality.

Intense personality my ass,
Or yours, for that matter.
The trace of violence I use
To season our sex
Is the keystone for the Arc de Triomphe
I'm building over your bed,
And over your head.
There is still in the mind
A powerful connection between sex and fear,
Between sex and pain,
Sex and death.

Whether hidden under layers
Of soft sensuality
Or magnified by machismo,
My physical threat must be there
For you to delight in and deny.

Once I've moved
Into your house and head
And become a part of you,
Like a growth in your breast,
And once I control everything in your life
From your toilet paper to your bank account
(You never ask yourself,
"If he's so smart, why doesn't
He ever have any money?"),
And when you think you've finally
'Trapped' your man (Amateurs!),
I'll leave.
If you're lucky.

I'll leave, or else become so impossible
You'll do anything, say anything, sign anything

To make me go away,

And by then you'll think you deserved it.

See you around, sweetheart,

And I will

See you around.

NEW LOVE ATTRACTS ADVICE

The men ask bolder questions, not quite "Done
Her yet?" but close. They offer homilies,
Analyses, their anecdotes all one
Nostalgic catalogues of ecstasies
Disguised as lessons learned from past campaigns,
Delightedly reliving victories
And draws till, confident, content again,
Each warms his hands above his memories.

The women are less graphic, more severe,
More warning, which becomes their theme,
Interpreting the omens that appear
Not dark exactly, but a little dim;
They advocate slow gallantries, revere
Sweet subtleties that never work on them.

“EVERYBODY SAY SHE GOT A MOJO”

She saw the children of the settlement... disporting themselves in such grim fashion as the Puritanic nurture would permit; playing at going to church, perchance, or at scourging Quakers... or scaring one another with freaks of imitative witchcraft.

-----Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter

Everybody say she got a mojo

Now, she's been usin' that stuff

-----Robert Johnson, "Little Queen of Spades" (Take One)

I went to the crossroads,

lit a cheap cigar,

and sat down on a green metal park bench.

I had the library behind me,

the Administration building to my left,

and the student union in front of me

across a stretch of lawn.

Sort of a college crossroads.

4I was here because the Dan's Bar
Stormy Monday Blues Jam
had dried up,
the Dan in question having discovered
to at least his own great surprise
that the blues wouldn't make him any money.

So here I sat, playing slide guitar
with an 11/16"
Craftsman stainless steel
spark plug socket
on a big blue Alvarez
six-string acoustic/electric
tuned in open G
with an arched action
and extra heavy strings
for that thick, fat, clean
Tampa Red tone.

The lawn in front of me was bowl-shaped,
like an amphitheater-in-the-round.
I'd only seen it used once

for any sort of gathering,
one September afternoon
when Governor Ann Richards
had come to town during
her unsuccessful run for re-election.
I still have the flyer that says:
"...And opening for the Governor, Hagfish."
Hagfish is a pretty good punkabilly band,
and for once I don't think the headliner
blamed the opening act.

It was a good place to play
on a warm night in October,
public, but not too underfoot.
A waifish young Hawaiian fellow
(yeah, I know, I didn't either)
talked to me for a while about slack-key guitar
and great musicians he had seen
but I had never heard of
because they only played for churches.
Jazz for Jesus.
A nice kid. He went home at ten o'clock.

Soon after that, a wave of patchouli
crashed into me from behind.
I dipped into a Son House groove
so I could look around without losing rhythm,
or what passes for it
when you're a two-thirds-blind white guy from Texas,
and you're not Johnny Winter.

About a dozen young people dressed in robes
both bath and ceremonial
trooped out onto the lawn with an air of great purpose
and great patchouli

Over the next hour or so,
they made a circle of candles
with a sort of altar
and a portable stereo
at its center.

The priestess briefed some bystanders
who had come to observe the proceedings for a class project;

As she spoke, she left odd pauses
just before any technical terminology,
like a child unaccustomed to swearing.

It seems that I had chosen
the very night and spot

TRU

(Texans for Religions Uncommon)
had chosen to publicly celebrate
the autumnal equinox.

I learned two things watching these rituals;
1: Wicca will never catch on in this country
because the hymns ain't got no rhythm,
and 2: the spirits seem to prefer
the key of C.

Four or five of the participants claimed
to have bonded with spirits
of fire and wind,
but they couldn't keep the candles
from blowing out,

causing me to have serious reservations
about the potency
of their particular mojos.

They also had a problem with insects.

White people dancing is one thing:

White people dancing like puppets with the D.T.'s
while slapping mosquitoes and scratching bites
belongs to a whole other quantum level of farce.

Eventually, they turned on their stereo,

Enya, of course.

Heavily reverbed and redubbed chants
over synthesized flutes and strings
always make me feel closer to nature.

I freely admit the possibility
that they turned on the music
to drown me out.

I'd been trying to add a little
John Lee Hooker boogie to the proceedings,
in the spirit of good citizenship.

Afterward, the priestess talked
with the visitors
while the others cleaned up
and traded Wiccan witticisms.
I wish I were making these up:

"If your ceremonial dagger
glows in the dark and says
Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers'
on the handle,
you might be a pagan redneck."

"If you've ever said the words,
Bobby, put that BB gun down
and help me cast this circle,'
you might be a pagan redneck."

After midnight, of course,
the happy little band drifted away.
One round-faced Shirley Temple
of a girl stopped to ask me,
"Did you have a good practice?"

"Well," I said,
"there's an old Delta folk tradition,
probably started by Tommy Johnson,
Peetie Wheatstraw, or guys like that
but erroneously associated ad nauseam
with Robert Johnson,
that if you go to a certain crossroads in Mississippi
just before twelve on a Saturday night,
the devil will come along
and give you a special guitar tuning
that will make you famous
in exchange for your soul."
She rubbed her hands together.

"Just my luck
that I come down here
just before midnight on a Monday
and conjure myself
up a bunch of teenaged Wiccans."

I said it to see

if she had any sense of irony
about the pose she
and her friends were striking.
My sarcasm must have been filtered out
by all the patchouli.
Her eyes grew Christmas-morning large;
"Fascinating, isn't it?" she whispered,
playing her role
right up to her exit line,
same as me.

OUT WITH AN EX-GIRLFRIEND

"What you and I need

Is a good woman...

Well, a bad woman.

Here's to a woman

Good at being bad."

I agree with her

And offer a toast

To professional

Heartbreakers. "Amen.

No more amateurs."

The rules are simple:

No talking about

The ones we're with now

But no being nice

About ones before.

I'm not really sure

Why the two of us
Do this to ourselves,
This session of Truth
And Consequences.

I asked her one time.
She bought us two shots
And said, "Well hell, Hank,
I'd marry you, if
I weren't so damn queer."

SPRING FEVER: A PIECE FOR PREPARED PIANO

The lover's lunchtime

"I'll see you later"

You know will come true

Bubbles in your head

The rest of the day

Like Ping-Pong balls

Trapped in a baby grand.

4 AM: THE LAS VEGAS EFFECT

So then I decide
to lug my jackpot--
all four bucks or so--
back across the street
into the Four Queens.

They have a snack bar
there where ninety-nine
cents buys a giant
shrimp cocktail, pardon
the oxymoron.

You know, yesterday,
I tried that joke on
a fare-- two young kids,
looked barely legal--
and this girl smarts off,

She has this shrill twang,

"Where on God's green Earth
do cab drivers learn
to use great big words
like 'oxymoron?'"

I say, "College, you
Rubenesque redneck
refugee from a
hair spray convention,
That's where I learned it."

Course, I did omit
the fact that it was
twenty years ago,
and I flunked out in
my third semester.

Driving this cab, though,
I got lots of time
to listen to books.
That's the way I got
my education.

See, my wife is blind;
she gets all these books
on tape in the mail,
and when I've been good,
she lets me borrow.

Jeez, no, not those chopped
and edited things
the yuppies listen
to on their commutes.
These are the full texts.

Today, I started
on Don Quixote.
The reader's good. He
did Hemingway's Death
in the Afternoon.

I like good stories,
mysteries, thrillers.
There's a cure for all

things except for death
and big Texas hair.

Big hair this girl had,
filled the whole back seat.
Her fiancée laughed
'til he sprayed snuff juice
all over his shirt.

Looked really nasty,
brown streaks all over
one of those neon-
colored western shirts,
smelled pretty bad, too.

Turns out her father
bribed them to elope
to Vegas instead
of the usual
wedding brouhaha.

Romantic ain't it?

Oh well. True love's course
never runneth smooth,
or something like that.
I'm paraphrasing.

Anyway, I go
into the snack bar
and order a shrimp
cocktail and a Coke
from the counter-girl.

She's really sweet, too,
just waits while I count
out a buck eighty's
worth of nickels from
my plunder-bucket.

She hands over my
Coke and my cocktail
and drops three green cents,
one coin at a time
in my plastic cup.

"I like the plink sound,"
she says, and what's great
is she doesn't give
me that annoying
'Tip, please' expression.

"So do I," I say,
and leave the bucket
there on the counter
and look for a place
to settle and graze.

The big drawback to
the Four Queens' snack bar
is the booths are full
all the swingin' time,
which leaves the tables.

I hate their tables.
They're spidery things--
these small, round bodies,

tall, long-legged barstools--

They make me feel weird.

I'm tall anyway,

so these things just make

me feel like a freak,

vulturing over

the folks in the booths.

Like I'm on a stage,

and I'm supposed to

do a magic act,

impersonations,

yeah, something like that.

I claim a table

close to the main floor.

It's a little less

creepy there, closer

to the traffic flow.

Well, I'm just started

good on my repast
when along comes the
Las Vegas Effect
and sits down with me.

See, people any
other place in this
country respect your
personal airspace.
Not in Nevada.

Here, people stand in
lines for everything:
lines for show tickets,
lines for the hotels,
lines for the buffets.

They sit ear to ear
at the slot machines,
blackjack tables, craps,
and nobody cares
who sits next to whom.

It's one of the great
things about this place;
you get to meet folks
from all stars and stripes,
and they tell you things.

This guy is that dry,
meatless kind of old,
with pink, swollen eyes--
indeterminate
Asian origin.

He has two cocktails
and eats one real fast
with fork and fingers
with his mouth over
the blue plastic glass.

And the weird part is
that every few bites
he stops, drops a shrimp,

sauce and all, leaves it
beached on the table.

He has quite a pile
after one cocktail
and takes a napkin
and sweeps the shrimp pile
back into the glass.

Then the fellow stuffs
a wad of napkins
down into the glass
on top of the shrimp
and starts on round two.

Same song, second verse--
Eat, pick, sweep, and stuff
the shrimp back into
the first cocktail glass,
never says a word.

He looks up at me

when he finishes,
then methodically
mops up the table
with some more napkins.

Finally, he takes
this shrimp and paper
parfait he's got now,
throws it in the trash,
and wanders away.

Isn't that absurd?
Must be enchantment.
Okay, here we are,
the Golden Nugget.
Let me get your bags.

Here's one of my cards.
Need a cab, call me
at this phone number--
day or night-- and ask
for Don Quixote.

REGARDING AN EARLY LINE

For William Carlos Williams

When Williams asked, "How shall I be a mirror
To this modernity?" he closed a frame
Around his poetry. Dispute the claim
As fiercely as you wish, his sometimes clear,
Sometimes refracted images--severe,
Obverse, cold-edged reflections--still became
A fractured mirror to his fractured time,
With broken places showing, rough and bare.

Modernity has grown a syllable
Too wide for any single man to be
A mirror to, but watch it squint and frown
At broken pieces held so close they fill
Its vision. Now, the question seems to me,
"How shall I make it put the mirror down?"

AT THE CORNER OF FRIDAY NIGHT AND SATURDAY MORNING:

PART TWO

I come out here to indulge

My Blind Lemon Jefferson fantasy.

I play guitar, yes

I sing, yes

But my "Prison Cell Blues"

Lacks a certain conviction,

And, as a blind man,

I am rather ambivalent

On the subject of tin cups.

JUST A MINUTE

Thoughts:

1 of Mother

3 of food

2 of leaving him

1 of leaving her

3 of sex

2 of death

1 of camels

Changes:

2 of mood

1 of heart

1 of attitude

2 of lane

3 of gear

Movements:

27 of lips

12 of feet

11 of hands

Statements:

1 of "Fine"

1 of "Yes"

Questions:

1 of "Are you okay?"

1 of "Got a cigarette?"

NOT HERE

With apologies to Háj Ross

My God, there are times when I'm glad
I'm not here.

A friend I would like to be my lover
looks gray and raw
instead of brown and creamy
because my friend who is her lover
hasn't called since she told him she needed distance.
She didn't mean now.

Another friend
sits on warm concrete steps
mapping out to me how she'll manage
to avoid remembering that her mother is dead
for another three months.

My own mother calls, with her
I'm going to ask you to do something,
but I know you're going to say no

so I'm already on the verge of tears

so I can start my cry full force

as soon as I hang up' voice.

(Patent-pending)

I say no.

She hangs up.

These little brushes with being

are all I need to know to know

to stay gone

if I can.

Gate... gate... paragate... parasamgate, bodhi svaha...

Gone... gone... far gone... much farther than gone...

It wasn't what the yogis had in mind, I'm sure,

but I could never be trusted

not to misuse other people's metaphysics.

SUGGESTIVE SELL

You're nearly home from work, and famished--damn.
It's Tuesday, and you're going to have to make
A list and do your weekly shopping, but
Your mother always told you, "Never buy
Your groceries when you're hungry," and you've learned
She had a point. The adolescent voice
From the drive-through speaker politely asks
If you'd like fries with that. As usual,
You would. The dollar burger in your bag
Will keep you on your budget. Never mind
That nagging wondering how many fries
And burgers you've consumed throughout your life.

On your way home, you've eaten half the fries
Because you like them crisp, and soon enough
They'll lie in their cardboard coffin, damp and cool.
A dark-haired fellow stops you on the stairs
To your apartment, "Pardon me, but where
Is the laundry room? My friend said if I came

And he wasn't home to try the laundry room."

You tell him that there isn't one for this

Particular apartment building, but

He's probably next door. In your mind, you walk

The route. Too complicated to explain,

You do the easier and kinder thing

And walk him there yourself. He sees his friend

Inside, but doesn't greet him right away.

"Do you live in these apartments?" You have turned

To leave him there, but something in his voice

Suggests that this encounter will not end

Abruptly. "No, the ones next door." You turn

Again. "Do you like them?" Beneath your arms,

Your skin is warming, and your meal is cooling.

"They're cheap, and nice enough." You turn again

And wonder if he's trying to get a date.

"This Sunday, my friend and I are going to church;

Do you think you'd like to come along with us?"

FRAGMENTS IN IMITATION OF SAPPHO

I.

The hem of her sundress

Conspires against

Her pink March thigh

One minute,

Me the next

II.

A rigid drink

And a tender steak

For the second-time bridegroom

May he learn his lesson, yet

III.

She's caught me looking

Oh God, there she goes

Oh God, here she comes!

IV.

Chocolate hair

Splashes on bare shoulders

I fall in love faster

Every passing year

THE LAUNDROMAT TRILOGY 1: MOST POLITE, CLASS OF '88

Is it a sign that you've become
a fascist when you wear headphones
to the record store?

The clerk must get insulted when I do that,
since probably his only perk
is that he gets to pick what goes
in that little plastic "Now Playing" rack
Beside the cash register.

How often is the selection
somebody you've ever heard
of or gave a rat's ass about?
If it's often, you're probably not old
enough to read this poem.

Lately, I'd been getting ready to write
a paper for a blues conference
on Robert Johnson,

so I'd been booking myself a compact disc tour
of the Mississippi Delta and boning up
on Bukka (Booker T. Washington) White,
Son (Eddie) House,
and Furry (Walter) Lewis licks
on my acoustic guitar.
My Stratocaster was feeling neglected.

After digging through the conveniently
stashed away
in the back
of the store
blues section
listening
to Muddy (McKinley Morganfield) Waters'
Library of Congress Stovall plantation recordings
while the rest of the customers,
both of them,
suffered the sounds of--
oh, it doesn't matter.
I settled on a new
Buddy (George) Guy

disc. I had to. He's the only player alive
who plays and sings so totally balls-out
on every song,
and my laundry was done.

"Do you have another expiration date?"

The kid at the counter
with the "Fuck me, I'm sensitive" glasses
asked me. I begged his pardon.

"Do you have an expiration date for this..."

Behind the glasses, I suspect his eyes
glazed over trying to decide what
to call what the State of Texas
issues blind people instead of Drivers' Licenses
so we can write checks
just like everybody else.

"It's an identification card."

"Not anymore."

Neither of us wanted to get philosophical
about it, so he made up another date.

McKinley, George, and I
booked it to the laundromat.

We almost made it, too,
got as far as the Mexican
restaurant just past the video store
when somebody started yelling at my back.

I never pay attention
to people yelling at me on the street.
Anyone who knows me well enough
to approach me knows
well enough to approach me
a little closer
and say something more intelligible
than, "Hey, buddy! Hey! Guy!"
(I know. I can't believe he said it either.)

Halfway past the restaurant
I got sick of hearing it,
so I spun around
and started walking back

the other way, hoping
it was the right direction
and that I looked sufficiently purposeful,
despite the fact that I was looking
into the setting sun
and could see substantially
more nothing than usual.

I figured it
was somebody mistaking me
for a drug dealer
named 'The Bear'
who wears a lot of black
T-shirts and leather
jackets and has long reddish-blond hair,
or I guess he does,
since once about every three months
or so someone mistakes me for him.
If I were dealing,
I'd dress like Bill Gates.

This guy stopped yelling

and met me in the middle
of the never-used-don't-even-look
side street between El Comal
and Pay-Less Video.

"Do I know you?" he asked,
stepping into focus.

He looked like a baby Bill Clinton
in a better suit. Blond hair, baby fat,
Shit, this guy's gonna pull a preach on me.

"I don't know. You might."

"Did you go to Crazy Water High School?"

"Guilty as charged."

"Hank D. Ballenger, right?"

Most Polite, Class of 88?"

"The election was rigged."

"Matt Baker, Most Likely to Succeed.

How are you? What are you doing?"

"Going to get my laundry."

I let him worry about that
a few seconds, let him flip
through the script to the scene
I had cut to. "I wish I could say
I was on my way to cure
an outbreak of Mad Cow Disease
or something less mundane,
but it's the truth."

To his credit, he managed
a successful switch
from socialized auto-interaction
to actual conversation
with minimal lag.

"Well, if laundry's the truth...
Anyway, I came up to Denton to see Tabby,
and she wanted to rent a movie.
I saw you walking by,
and I just had to see if it was you."

Tabby would have to be Tabby Chestnut,

voted, as I recall, Most Likely to Bitchslap
Her Parents for Giving Her a Stupid Name
That Marred Her Personality for Life.

I remember because I was up
for that one myself.

You try to be suave, urbane,
the epitome of the kind of person
who uses the word epitome
when your Christian name
sounds like the call
of the unnatural progeny
of a game of "Duck, Duck, Goose"
gone ugly.

I didn't have to ask how Tabby was.

"Do you always wear Christian Dior
to the video store?"

Got him again. He thought
he'd made it to the end
of the scene,
the part just before,

"Hey, it's good to see you again,

take care of yourself, man."

He looked down at himself, at me,
and over his shoulder
at an expensive car.

"Oh, I just came straight
up here from Dallas after work.
I work for Tedco Insurance now.
I can't believe there's anybody else
from Crazy Water
still living in Denton."

He immediately regretted
the way he'd said it,
wondering if I'd heard an implication
dishonorable, unworthy
of one of my station.

"Well, Matt," I said, falling
back on the comradely tone of voice
that had gotten me out
of years of trouble,

"The thing about Denton is that
as bad as it is
folks like us from Crazy Water
know there's someplace worse."

Slowly, very slowly, the wide-open smile
that had probably talked more innocents
into full coverage
than a Mormon grandmother
commandeered his face.

I decided to remember him that way;
I walked off toward the laundromat.

THE LAUNDROMAT TRILOGY 2: DOES THAT EXCITE YOU?

"If I am always in love, blame
It on my wide-ranging interests."

---Ovid, The Amores

I'll tell you up front that this
Is another laundromat poem.
Trust me on this--if nothing else--
Anytime you're short
On fresh material,
Fill a green plastic basket with underwear
And hit the street.

Since my neighborhood washeteria's
Toddler-to-dryer ratio
Makes serious concentration impossible,
I took along the Penguin Classics Ovid,
The Erotic Verses
(the one with the pink stripe on the binding).

It's a great translation,
Plays fast and loose
With the idioms
So that it reads like
Pre-incarnated Ferlinghetti.
I even think I heard
An echo of Eliot,
Which ought to put paid
To the Modernist Project
Once and for all.

Ovid,
Myself,
And my basket of tidy-whities
(I won't be cool enough
To wear boxers
Until I own three more John Coltrane albums)
Trooped downstairs
To find that my apartment
Building's parking lot
Lay in the path of a purling rill
Of fifteen-year-old girls

In black leotards.
Cheerleading camp
Was in session again,
And I live on one of their ant trails.

Here were my options:
Stand there like a perve,
Watching Jailbait on Parade
Like my next-door neighbor does
(He sells knives for a living
And breaks things with his head for fun.
I don't care much for the comparison)
Or cross--and be reminded
That I am now
No more a figure of interest
To teenaged girls
Than I had been
Back when it wouldn't have gotten me arrested.

Maybe I'm a bit sensitive
On this subject;
Recently, I learned that a woman

I had been planning to invent euphemisms with

Was only nineteen.

Hank, I said to myself,

You're too old to be chasing around

Nineteen-year-old girls.

Then it occurred to me

That I was so old

That I knew I was too old

To be chasing nineteen-year-old girls,

Making me older still.

"Ladies, may I cut in?"

I asked. Trouble was,

The ones who heard me,

And one even smiled,

Couldn't really stop,

So they sort of veered off

At odd angles to let me

Slip in behind them,

Surprising the hell

Out of the next girls in line

When a big guy

With a basket of underwear

Interposed himself.

The current swept me

A dozen yards or so downstream

Before I managed to emerge.

A little dizzy from the hair spray

And hormones bouncing around

Like Contac tiny time pills,

And make it to the corner.

A blonde woman poked her head

Out of a car window

While I waited to cross.

"Sir, munumbra juncra pommes de terre?"

She asked. I don't know either.

"Excuse me?" I asked politely.

"Sir, did you just wash your underwear?"

"Does that excite you?" I asked.

She laughed.

Some women should not be allowed

To laugh in public, if only

To preserve the self-esteem of geese.
I gave up on the notion of a fairer sex,
Or even a juster one,
Or even one more evenly distributed,
Many years ago,
But I'd hoped to have gone to my grave
Not knowing
That a woman could make a sound like that.

I've only got one question left.
Which is more pretentious:
Reading Ovid in a laundromat
Or just holding Ovid in a laundromat,
Writing a poem about teenaged girls
In the margins?

THE LAUNDROMAT TRILOGY 3: YOU HEAD SO BIG

This is the last laundromat poem,

I promise.

I've moved to a better-appointed apartment complex.

I was dividing my attention

between Bukowski's Septuagenarian Stew,

my clothes in dryer four,

and a black man to my right teaching a little boy

how to play the dozens.

“Your head's so big

you can wear a phone booth

for an earring.”

I'd been watching this little drama

since the spin cycle.

Seems Mom,

who stayed well on the other side

of the washeteria most of the time,

was testing this man.

"Well, you head so big
it look like a dinosaur."

"Any man," I imagine her saying,
"can be good to a child every other weekend or so,
take him places,
buy him treats.
Let's see how he handles the real
day-to-day kind of stuff."

"Your head's so big
you need a fork lift for a hat-rack."

Two things were clear:
the little boy had been through this before,
and trying to teach a seven-year-old
how to play the dozens
was a bad idea.

"Well, you head so big,

it look like a cow."

"No, Thomas, that won't work.

It's not funny."

"Yeah it is, you look like a cow."

"No, that's not funny, it's just strange.

Say something else."

"You say something else."

I wanted to help him out;

but dozens for the Disney crowd

is not my specialty.

All the lines I know are strictly NC-17.

He seemed like a nice guy.

He even kept his cool when the kid talked

about his "other daddy" and his "first daddy."

"Your head's so big

they post hurricane warnings

every time you get a cold."

Good one. Go for snot.

Snot works.

Picture if you will a group of first-graders
on a playground
shot from the waist down,
a Gap Kids logo in the bottom
right corner of the screen.

"Best pickle joke," one says.
"That's a given," another replies,
kicking a soccer ball, "What's big and green
and fights bad guys?"
In chorus: "A Mighty Morphin' Power Pickle!"
Kids that age are natural born surrealists.
I guess Bukowski never grew out of it.

"You head so big
they post warnings
when you get a cold."
"That's not funny."
"Yeah it is."
"You just said the same thing I did."

"Well, it was funny."

"But that's not the way it goes, Thomas.

You have to say something funny and different."

Tell me about it.

THE ONE CHORD

The twelve-string growls out

The first four bars, slow,

Inexorable

As old age. I grind

Deep into the strings.

Up to the fourth, now,

A woman drops two

Coins into the case.

It's mostly coins or

Some subway tokens.

Back to the one chord.

What language was that?

Words take time to fall

Down to my level,

The speaker long gone.

A train worries past,

Masking the fifth chord

Completely, but some

Kid still drops a bill.

Kind, but depressing.

Through the fourth to one,

Always back to one.

A little girl stops

To dance, but Mother

Scoops her up, away.

FETTUCINI CARBONARA

The last time I fell
In love, she wrote down
My pasta order
And said, "You're all talk,
Aren't you? You're just talk."
I keep telling her
She's judged me harshly.

THE OTHER MAN

The woman in the black bikini whipped
Her head around and pulled the trigger on
A harpoon gun of dark-eyed indignation,
A challenge: "Who are you to look at me?"
Unfortunately, he was only Steve
And hardly up to it. He turned away
To hurry past the pool and out of range.

He felt more than he heard the doorbell ring
Above the friendly roar inside, the red
Domesticated dragon grazing on
Kim's carpet. Careful not to put his weight
On anything but dirt, Steve took a step
Into the bed of marigolds beside
Her doormat. August sunlight seized and pinched
His neck between its lobster claws and pressed
His helpless shadow through her windowpanes
To lie in neat, square sections on her rug.
Her mostly level horizontal blinds

Cut latitudes across his head and back.
He leaned aside and hooked his thumbs to make
A shadow-spider crawl across her floor.

Kim didn't kiss him first, just drew him in
And closed the door. He looked around himself,
Began to itemize the differences,
The signs of a successful coup d'état.
She wrapped her arms around him from behind
And squeezed. Uncertain where to put his eyes
Among the mix of intimate and strange
Possessions, her possessions, purified,
He settled on the little table where
That awful lamp had perched beside the couch.
They'd tried to topple it while making love,
To rid themselves of this purple elephant
With yellow tusks that her husband loved so much
He wouldn't have it anywhere but here--
Well, not here exactly anymore--
They'd kicked at it until it tumbled down
And broke one plastic tusk. They'd giggled into
Each other's flesh, and neither could go on.

She'd told her husband that the cat had killed
His elephant, had kept a sober face,
Somehow, while he interrogated it.
A little glue, a change of bulb, and it
Was back in place, offending delicate
Artistic sensibilities anew,
Till now. She took him to the couch, released
Him there, and looked around for a cigarette.
She wore her reddish hair tied back behind
for housework, and it took a dozen years
Away sometimes, a change that gave him pause.
She looked about fifteen when she went out
In shorts and tennis shoes, a lanky kid
Too young for smoking. Someone ought to take
Those things away before her parents come.
She sat beside him, turned, and swung her legs
Around to lie across his lap and waited.
He stroked her calves and wondered what to do.

SONNETS TO REPETITIOUS, II:13

For R. M. Rilke

Be distant, gone before you really leave,
For somewhere in these partings is the part
That parts you so completely that you have
To part from it or sacrifice your art.

Be dead in her, in us, to rise again
In safe, non-referential compositions.
Be what is best in this decayed domain,
The tree that falls escaping our detection.

Be Being, not Becoming, but beware
The Nothingness within where all of your
Superlative superlatives have come.

Be Zero, that when placed beside the din,
The anxious total, angels, dogs and men,
Your perfect perfectness negates the sum.

WHEN ANNE STOPPED CHANGING

We'd been together long enough
For Anne to feel comfortable
Walking with me to the video store
In her gym clothes.
She held the yellow tags
One in each hand,
Weighing them.

I never look at the tags
When I rent a video.
That's how I ended up
With a Playboy tape
Instead of Three Colors: Red.

On a 'bad movie night'
I wouldn't have cared, really,
But when you expect
Kieslowsky and Irene Jacob,
Alan Smithee and Tanya Tease

(or whoever) won't do.

Besides, show me

A girl in a Playboy video

Who compares favorably

With Irene Jacob and I'll...

Well, okay, so I'll probably become a stalker.

"You know," she said,

Still weighing the tags,

"I counted last Tuesday;

In the twelve and one-half weeks

We've been dating,

We've seen thirteen movies

And two plays,

And not one of them has made me cry."

She raised her eyes to mine

And let me finish the accusation for myself.

She had Midnight Cowboy in her left hand,

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues in her right.

Obviously, something must be done.

Roger Ebert's Video Companion

Says Map of the Human Heart

"...Deals with familiar emotions

But not in a familiar way."

I say it's the most powerful

Kurt Vonnegut story

Kurt Vonnegut never wrote:

About people with problems,

Not movie-problems,

The kind of film Meg Ryan does not make

And Nora Ephron does not write

And Rob Reiner does not direct.

After culture, friendship, love, youth, and Dresden

Had been fire-bombed into submission,

And the closing credits rolled,

Anne sat next to me on the couch,

Her shoulders hunched forward,

Face in her hands.

We'd made it to the caterers' credit

Before she could say anything intelligible.

"Horrible," she kept saying, "horrible."

The next weekend we saw a park production
Of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Anne seemed happier.

I got bitten by mosquitoes.

I'd come to assume
That her insistence on changing
"Into something nice"
--no matter how casual an evening
we had planned or unplanned--
Was more to satisfy
Her feminine need for preparation
Than any reflection of her regard for me.
What, you never thought anything stupid?
Of course she left me:
About a month later,
For a guy in Collections
She met at a company softball game.

AT THE CORNER OF FRIDAY NIGHT AND SATURDAY MORNING:

PART THREE

A car idles at the corner in front of me;

"Hank," someone says.

"Hank, over here!" someone shouted,

Starting the game.

I ran to the voice, eyelids, brows, and cheeks clenched

Squeezing out the bleached white afternoon sun,

Plotting a course

--ten feet at a time--

Through the swings and ropes and other schoolyard obstacles

To stand, panting, where no one else is.

"No, four eyes, over here!"

After three or four runs across the playground,

I tired, or pretended to, stumbled, fell,

Then just walked, too slow to be worth watching,

But I always went. Always.

You go when they call you, whoever they are.

You go.

"Hank!" Insistent now,
A woman's voice over a grouchy engine.
No one I know well
Even tries greeting me from this distance.
I'm an easy person to avoid.
Makes breakups easier.

"Hank--" the engine surges
From a knee-jerk shove on the gas.
Pavlov would have loved stoplights.

The light has changed again
By the time I match
A voice to the voice.
A woman I'd like to be in love with/
She lives down this street.
She might come back.

EXPERIENCE PREFERRED

"I'll try to say it one more time,
Keeping it simple for you.
Number One, he's read everything.
Number Two, he makes me laugh a lot,
And Three, I may have called him a freak six months ago,
But I know I never called him a dinosaur.
Besides, he makes me happy, and that should be
Enough for you."

My best friend, Miss Subtlety, is trying to explain to me
Again,
Why she has 'feelings' for him
Mostly as a way to codify them for herself,
And it may well be that,
Among all the things she's decided
To forget about him,
She's decided to forget
How much and for how long
I've wanted those feelings for myself.

I let her keep talking,
Just shuffle my feet at the other end
Of the phone line, mentally reaching up
To adjust my older brother's tie
Around my sweaty neck
As the manager says,
"You were all really strong applicants
With excellent qualifications, but..."

My friend Dan told me I was too nice,
After telling him about the time last July Fourth
When one of my occasionally lesbian ex-girlfriends
Came over so I could give her self-esteem
A cuddle and a hand job.
(What I like about those three lines is that any way you read them,
They're still true)
He'd never have put up with that,
If he were me.

Right now, I imagine Dan would say something like,
"Of course he's read everything."

He's had time enough, seeing as though,
(had he been a randy teenager,
Which I doubt,
Since by all accounts, before you he hasn't had sex
Since the Carter administration,)
The guy's old enough to be your father."

What Dan has actually said on the subject was,
"You're only old enough to have known her since
You were both going through puberty,
But, since you've been making her laugh
For pretty hefty chunks of the time since,
I'd say your resume
Looks pretty good according to
Criterion Number Two."

This is the part where Miss Subtlety says
(and she will, since she'll read this before you do)
"You're not in competition with him.
You never were."
See why I changed her name to Miss Subtlety?

(by the way, there's a postmodern
audience-participation joke ahead,
so start thinking of the name
of the last really boring journal
you read, especially if it has
recently rejected some of your work)

"You're not being fair," she'll say.

Ah, but that's the advantage poetry has over reality.

It's my poem. I don't have to be fair,

And, since I'm feeling particularly undiplomatic at the moment,

I'll take this opportunity

To remind her how much she sounds like

The last woman who hurt me,

The one Miss Subtlety hates so much for saying she was dumping me

"For someone cool, a lot of fun."

"It's not fair, putting me in

The same category with her.

She was an evil bitch who hurt you

More than you'll admit."

Fair poems don't get published, Miss Subtlety,

Except in (fill in the blank) Quarterly.

A funny thing is that I've never had to sit

In the room with the rejected applicants.

I've gotten every actual job I've ever interviewed for.

LOS BRAZOS DE DIOS

1.

The water whispered "River?" to itself
Shrugging its shoulders against the strips of sand
That hung like wrinkled, mostly-empty sleeves
On either bank. What water August left
Behind moved at the unpredictable
But, on the average, slow, hiccuping pace
Of a sleepy toddler. Aaron's metal seat
Complained about his constant leaning forward,
Leaning backward, paddle skimming past
The silver hull of their canoe, first left,
Then right, his long red braid political
Across his back. Since he had been a boy,
He'd loved the Brazos' optical illusions;
Just now, he felt a kind of vertigo,
Displacement, like a child whose swing stands still
While the Ptolemaic playground races by.

He pulled the world a little further round
Its axis. Erin sat in front today,

Engaging in her hourly fidgeting.
She lay her paddle across her lap and peeled
Her shirt, submerged it, wrung it overhead,
Then drenched it several times again to bathe
Her shoulders, neck, and breasts. She took especial
Care to keep her camera dry, despite
Its claims. He watched the bones and muscles move
Between her short, damp hair and shoulder blades
As she thoroughly stretched each muscle group
In turn, from her beltline to her hairline.
Sometimes he'd lie behind her in the night,
The sheet pulled back to let a folded steel
Katana of a moon cut shadows, lines,
Calligraphies familiar as her name
Along her spine, shivering with her breath.
He'd trace them with his little fingertip,
Keeping a flower petal's depth of space
Between them, so as not to send her dreams
Careening. Once, he'd read one shadow-word
Too many, and it scared him straight to sleep.

Reclining on their gear, she swung her legs

Apart and overboard to dip her toes
And feel their forward progress. Two small wakes
Nested inside the larger one and turned
As it turned, slightly to the left, away
From a resurrection of sand ahead. She rose
On elbows, turned, and blew a kiss, a gust
Of friendly lechery that stirred the air
Between them. Aaron braced for the attempt
To crawl to her and personally return
The gesture, and had almost closed his eyes
When something moved, another water-trail
Spare inches from her foot. His senses tense
In recognition, he could even see
A long, brown body whipping underneath
The surface, behind the slightly bobbing head.
"Honey," he said, dry leather in his throat
From stiff disuse, "please pull your legs back in."
She moved her feet two inches. Irritation
And Dublin blending in her voice, she asked,
"Whatever for?" He thrust his paddle blade
Straight down and levered back: a swell of green
With wisps of froth washed over glove and wrist,

But the vessel slowed and turned aside much less
Than he'd intended. Erin used the gunwales
To lift herself and see, then grabbed her chest;
"My God," she said, and gathered in her feet.
He held their course the way she took her pictures,
Straight and true as death, while something cold
and frightened turned his insides into water.

THE WOODEN FLOOR

7.

The Sergeant always knocks two times before
He enters our apartment on the chance,
I guess, that I'm so totally engrossed
In some undignified activity
On the coffee table that I'd fail to hear
Him falling up the stairs, Godzilla boots
And all. This morning, he's surprised to see
Me sitting here in last night's party clothes.
I drink my milk and wish I lived alone.
"Up awful early, man," he says and leaves
A trail of camouflage across the room
And down the hall to the bathroom, coming back
In boxers and superiority.
I only barely beat him home and should
Unquestionably have put my aching eyes
And conscience right to bed. He plops himself
Down on his recliner, cranks it back,
Then turns on John McLaughlin. "Issue one,"
He honks contentedly, "How was she, man?"

6.

The wooden floors of Kristen's wooden house
Spread nervous gossip room to room. I heard her
Careening through the kitchen, living room,
Concealing evidence, the bottles, plates,
Debris a party always leaves behind.
I stretched my arms and legs beyond the verge
Of Brian's--or maybe it was Allan's bed.
The Hobbit on the wall pretended not
To notice the large naked man in the small
Boys' bedroom. He just loitered by his hole,
Smoking his morning pipe. I kicked away
The Power Ranger quilt and gave the floor
Good reason to complain. I nearly had
My belt buckled when Kristen lightly pushed
Open the bedroom door, Schlong Bong' in one
Hand and a cup of coffee in the other.
"Breakfast," I said, "the most important meal
Of the day." She didn't laugh. "Control yourself,
The boys are on their way." She handed me
The cup so fast I barely got control

While she took the penis with her down the hall.

5.

The Superhero on the comforter
Encircled us with awkward, twisted arms.
Beneath the blanket, Kristen pressed her cheek
Against the hairless swath between my chest
And stomach further muffling the words
That fell between her coughs and ragged breaths.
As gently as I could, I moved the hand
She wasn't squeezing back and forth across
Her trembling shoulders, tried to smooth away
The ripples in the pool. "He grabbed my legs
To drag me off the couch. I hit my head
On something, got dizzy." She tightened in
My arms, grew more compact and hard. "He knew.
I'd told him I was pregnant several days
Before, but he kept hitting me and tearing
At my clothes. He always had this vanity
About his hands, long fingers, manicured nails,
And these nails kept cutting into my thighs, my neck."
She wiped her eyes against me. "And the boys,

The boys were sharing a bath. These little wet,
Bare feet came slapping down the hall and stopped
When Michael saw them there, he told them I..."
The nausea she'd been fighting broke her grip
On both of us and pulled her away to run
For the door, throwing up on her hands, her dress.
I pulled the blanket back around myself
And waited for the nothing coming next.

4.

We cleared away the bears and other soft
Companions from the matching beds, from both
Of them to satisfy some drunken sense
Of symmetry. "It's like two little gangs.
Brian gets pissed if one of Allan's guys
Gets mixed with his. It's macho bullshit, but
It's kind of cute." She bent to segregate
The dinosaurs and mammals. When she'd done,
I had my shoes and jacket on the floor
Between the beds. She sat across the aisle
From me and pointed at my shirt. "You going
To take that off and go to bed like someone

Human or just stand there looking cool?"
I lost a button somewhere on my way
To getting human. Kristen picked it up
And held it to her eye, examining
Me through the tiny holes. "you look to me
Like somebody with something else to ask."
I lied the only way I'd ever learned,
From her. I went expressionless as glass
And said, "Well, nothing I can think of now."

3.

"Congratulations, Kristen, yet another
Tremendously successful party had."
She sprawled across me on her little couch
To let the evening--morning, really--slide
Around her shoulders to the floor. We talked
In slow and lazy sentences, with long
Comfortable silences between.
"Yeah, everything worked out. I wasn't sure
How all my funky friends would get along."
"I think my favorite part was when we played
That game of doubles verbal tennis with

Those gorgeous twins," I said. "I knew Christine
And Lisa would charm you sockless, you old lech.
Especially when Lisa rambled on
About that rubber tubing. I would say
The lady had your full attention." "Shit,
At least I didn't stand there gawking like
That moron, Paul. Why couldn't you replace
The rock you found that awful little troll
Pontificating under?" "Not my fault,
He came with Heloise. Go rant at her."
"That conversation reminded me of something
I've meant to ask you about for quite awhile,
And since you're far too drunk and stoned to drive
Me home, I think I'm going to ask you now."
She came up off my lap. "And what is that?"
"Remember back that time you tied me up?"
That didn't seem to be what she'd expected,
So I assigned a little gin-soaked piece
Of brain the task of solving that one while
I carried on. "You tied my wrists behind
My head, blindfolded me, and then you left
The room." She nodded noncommittally,

Waiting, it seemed, to see where this would lead.
"I thought you'd gone to change the stereo
Or something, but you didn't, but I swear
I heard you doing something in the kitchen,
Closing a cupboard, then you padded back
To your bedroom door and stopped. You didn't say
A word, but I could feel you standing there
Staring at me for I don't know how long."
At first she looked afraid, of judgment? Blame?
But that collapsed into her "Geisha Face,"
The glassy look she used when totally
Unsure if she should lie or tell the truth
Or what even what she really felt at all.
In classic Japanese pornography,
The woman always wears the same blank look
Of patient porcelain, expressionless
Despite what might be happening to her.
When we were dating, Kristen had given me
A book of prints, then demonstrated how
She made her "Geisha Face." "And then you sighed
And sort of whispered to yourself, I can't.'
You went away again, came back, untied

My hands, and on we went." A little chipping
Around the edges, keep it going, keep
It light. "Two years I've wondered, now I'm drunk
And brave enough to ask, just can't do what?"

2.

"We look like Botticellis, but our name
Is Rubenesque," said Lisa, offering
The penis pipe to Paul and me. He passed
And tried to look away when I accepted
Kristen's prize possession. Some men act
So comical whenever it's around.
I faked an extra hit to watch him squirm,
This squattish, hairy man who thought his pipes
And fuzzy jackets made him look less short.
He said, "I rarely hear art puns these days,
My screenplay/dissertation keeps me home
Too much to have the time to pun with the proles."
I handed off the bong to Heloise
And asked Christine about the project they
Had helped our host prepare for Simpson's class

Before dear Paul could call us proles' again.
We watched a lot of films depicting twins
And told her what we thought. They got it wrong,
Of course, but that was Kristen's point." "Dead Ringers,"
Lisa said, "Was just the funniest
Of all, the best at being fake, but that
One had the scary doctor's office scene.
A little bondage can be kind of fun,
But stethoscopes and rubber tubing? Yuck!"

1.

"Now let me get this straight," the Sergeant said,
"Your former girlfriend's going to pick you up
To take you to a party at her house
Tonight, and nothing's up?" He shook his head
And laced his boots, "I don't believe it man."
"We've known each other for years, way back before
We tried to date." I really hated him
When he smirked at me like that. "So you're just friends.
Okay, I give. To me, it's really weird.
My exes never ever call unless
They want me back. You're getting laid tonight."